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U.S. still willing to aid Seychelles

By James Morrison
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The United States is prepared to offer limited military training to the Seychelles even though North Korean troops help keep the island government in power in its fight against exiled anti-communist rebels, according to David Fischer, director of the State Department office of East African Affairs.

Although the State Department last week said it believes the North Koreans might be preparing to leave the island, a spokesman for the Seychelles resistance has said the North Koreans are as entrenched as ever.

Critics of such U.S. aid call the Seychelles government a Marxist dictatorship and argue that any U.S. offer of military aid makes a mockery of the Reagan administration's often-stated goals of supporting democratic resistance movements.

Critics also believe that troops from Tanzania, which helped Seychelles ruler France Albert Rene overthrow a democratically elected government in 1977 and helped keep him in power until North Koreans replaced them about a year ago, will return to the Seychelles if the North Koreans leave.

About 125 North Koreans act as Mr. Rene's bodyguards and help train his army on the strategically located archipelago of 92 islands, located about 800 miles off the east coast of Africa. The islands lie in the oil shipping routes from the Red Sea through the Indian Ocean and around the southern cape of Africa.

The main island of Mahe is home to a U.S. Air Force radar station, reputed to track NASA satellites but also said to collect spy satellite data.

U.S. military training for the Seychelles is not contingent upon the removal of North Korean troops, said Mr. Fischer, former U.S. ambassador to the Seychelles. In fact, he said, the U.S. has had a longstanding offer of military training to the Seychelles.

The State Department is preparing to discuss a military program when the Seychelles defense minister, Ogilvy Berlouis, visits the United States next month. If Mr.

Rene accepts the U.S. offer of military training, the State Department would interpret that move as an effort of the Seychelles to move out of the Soviet sphere of interest, Mr. Fischer said.

"We have reason to believe [the Seychelles government] will accept it," Mr. Fischer said.

"We will be pleased if the North Koreans are, in fact, leaving," he said. "We believe it would show that the Rene government is becoming more non-aligned."

"That's just bloody nonsense," said Rear Adm. (Ret.) Robert J. Hanks, former head of U.S. naval forces in the Middle East whose command included the Seychelles.

"Anybody who thinks we are going to be able to buy their return to democracy and capitalism is smoking that stuff that's illegal," he said.

Seychelles exiles in London expressed shock when told of the State Department's plans.

"I would find it extremely difficult to believe," said Gerard Hoarau, president of the Seychellois National Movement, the exiles' political front. "I cannot see the United States approving of a one-party state where no opposition is allowed and, especially, one with human rights abuses."

"We look to the United States as a guardian of democracy," he added. "But I think the United States is letting us down very badly."

Paul Chow, a spokesman for the Seychellois resistance who visited the United States recently, said any member of the Seychelles military who receives U.S. training will return to the islands and "continue to oppress the people."

Mr. Fischer said the Seychelles is showing other signs of what he called a "more balanced foreign policy." Mr. Rene has allowed the return of U.S. Navy ships for rest-and-recreation tours and is toning down his previous anti-U.S. rhetoric at the United Nations, Mr. Fischer said.

"He's no Soviet puppet," he said of Mr. Rene.

Since Mr. Rene took power in the Seychelles, he has aligned himself with the Soviet Union, Cuba and North Korea, and has been quoted, in his own party newspaper, as

praising the leaders of those communist countries.

He has also consolidated power in his own political party, the Seychelles People's Progressive Front, outlawed the opposition Seychelles Democratic Party, silenced the opposition press and locked up political opponents, some of whom were accused of trying to overthrow the government in an aborted 1981 coup. They were later either convicted or exiled.

That coup, financed by Seychelles exiles of the Movement for the Resistance, was led by the legendary mercenary Col. Michael "Mad Mike" Hoare, who hijacked a plane to South Africa when the coup failed. He was later arrested and sentenced to 10 years in a South African jail.

Amnesty International, in a report this year, identifies several political prisoners not connected with that coup who are still held by Mr. Rene. The international human rights group also calls for investigations into suspected murders of political opponents.

Mr. Rene created the Seychelles' first army, estimated at 800 troops; accepted Soviet arms; allowed Soviet warships to use the island ports; and invited in Soviet and Cuban advisers.

He has strongly denied Western press reports that the Soviet Union has a military base on the Seychelles. Check hyphenation.

The idyllic islands, whose 65,000 inhabitants are a mixture of Asians, Africans and Europeans, are reputed to have been the original Garden of Eden.

Today the Seychelles is a pawn in the global superpower chess game, according to experts like Adm. Hanks, now a consultant with the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis.

"We can do without the Seychelles as long as nobody else gets it," he said. "If the Soviets have it, it would be a big problem."

He said an unfriendly power in control of the Seychelles could threaten U.S. military installations on Diego Garcia, another island in the Indian Ocean. An enemy could also use the islands as a permanently based aircraft carrier to refuel combat planes and as a sea-port for battleships in a war in the Indian subcontinent, Africa or the Middle East, he said.

Adm. Hanks said the offer of U.S. military training will only increase Mr. Rene's control over the Seychelles people.

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"Rene is going to use them for the same reason he used the North Koreans," he said.

The U.S. military training is being offered through the U.S. International Military Education Training program, which offers logistical, transportation, combat or leadership training to foreign military personnel. The State Department has budgeted \$50,000 to train Seychelles military personnel in the United States.

The offer of military training is not contingent upon the removal of North Korean troops, Mr. Fischer said. Although an official explanation of the reported withdrawal of the North Koreans is unavailable, Mr. Fischer said, he suspects they have had cultural and language difficulties with the Seychelles people.

The Seychelles U.N. ambassador, Giovinnella Gonthier, did not respond to a reporter's inquiry about the reported movement of Korean troops from the islands.

Asked if supporting a government that overthrew a democratically elected president is consistent with President Reagan's philosophy, Mr. Fischer pointed out that the United States has many bilateral relations with one-party states.

